EMU entrepreneur seeks out problems to find opportunities

LEISA THOMPSON, THE ANN ARBOR NEWS

Bilal Saeed, a 23-year-old senior at Eastern Michigan University, has started a monthly publication about the college's strengths and diversity called emYOU.

New magazine helps students navigate

BY GEOFF LARCOM
The Ann Arbor News

Pakmode publications seems at first like dozens of other businesses around downtown Ypsilanti.

You ring the intercom and the owner buzzes you up to the third floor of an elegant, older building on Pearl Street.

But step inside the office and it's clear this is no ordinary business and no ordinary owner. It's Bilal Saeed, a 23-year-old senior at Eastern Michigan University, who started the company last fall with the goal of putting out a magazine that showcased EMU's strengths and diversity while catering to the needs of students.

The magazine – emYOU – debuted in January. The second edition came out last week.

Saeed says the magazine, which has a staff of 11 present and former students, seeks to entertain while helping students navigate college life.

Regular features include stories spotlighting noteworthy students, faculty and alumni, plus a historical look at Ypsilanti or EMU. This month's issue also offers tips on decorating your apartment on a student's budget, plus ideas for the perfect Valentine's Day celebration. Each month also features an interesting elective students can take, such as a life drawing class with nude models.

Saeed started the magazine with three partners, Mike D'amato, Tim Adkins and David Thomas. Together, Saeed says, the four raised around $5,000 for such initial expenses as rent and printing costs. (The magazine is printed by The Ann Arbor News.)

Taking such a risk apparently came naturally for Saeed, a senior majoring in entrepreneurship. At age 20, he bought a house in Ypsilanti Township, using money he'd earned serving as a manager

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Inspired by his family

of several area Sunglass Hut outlets. He now rents rooms in the house to fellow students.

His publications company, Pakmode, relates to his Pakistani heritage. It was the nickname of a clique of business-oriented friends he grew up with in Sarnia, Ontario, across from his hometown of Port Huron. Saeed was the youngest of the group of Muslim students, all of whom now enjoy successful business careers.

Saeed says he draws inspiration from his family. His father, a psychiatrist, came from a modest background, yet made his way through college and medical school. His two sisters attended the University of Michigan for their undergraduate studies, with one moving on to Notre Dame's law school and the other studying dentistry at Harvard.

"Oh, you're a Saeed?" he remembered hearing from those who knew the high-achieving family. "And you're at Eastern?"

Yet the EMU business school and The Echo campus newspaper offered challenge and responsibility, plus the chance to carve a distinctive niche on campus. "I love it here, I love Eastern," Saeed says.

The idea for the magazine arose this past year, the culmination of his experience at The Echo, which Saeed immediately joined after transferring in 2004 from the University of Michigan-Dearborn.

In his role as advertising director, he helped stage various charity events, and realized the positive effect the media could have on people. He oversaw a student survival guide that was published in The Echo last summer, which gave him an idea. Why not publish such helpful information regularly?

Like a number of active students at EMU, Saeed had suffered through the waves of bad publicity that washed over Eastern in recent years, and he noted a lack of school spirit. He responded with emYOU, which is distributed around campus and is filled with local advertising.

Colleagues and friends praise the new magazine, and credit Saeed for his drive, focus and energy.

Jeremy Allen, a contributing editor to emYOU who met Saeed while they worked together at The Echo, says the possible quickly becomes probable to Saeed. "Once he puts his mind to doing something, it's going to get done," Allen says.

Kevin Devine, director of student media at EMU for the past six years, says Saeed is the first student he's seen to start a publication from scratch.

"He's a great salesman and he's a great manager," Devine says. "He really can inspire people."

Saeed ultimately hopes to launch a national college magazine aimed at the needs of students.

"I always seek out problems, and am always looking for solutions," he says while sitting in the office overlooking Pearl Street. "A lot of times that results in opportunity."

Read more from Geoff Larcom at blog.mlive.com/geoff_larcom/. He can be reached at 734-994-6838 or glarcom@annarbornews.com.

Bilal Saeed

School: Senior at Eastern Michigan University.

Major: Entrepreneurship.

Age: 23.

Hometown: Port Huron.

Family: Parents are Dr. Mohammad and Farzana Saeed; sisters Sairah and Sophia.

Passions: Entrepreneurship, learning, helping people and Ypsilanti.

Favorite movie: "Super Troopers."

Favorite book: "The Creature from Jekyll Island."

The ideal day: When Pakmode Publications successfully launches a national college magazine.

Philosophy of life: Less talk, more action.

In 10 years: "I will be helping my dad build a school in Faislabad, Pakistan."